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By MIKE FAHER

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For the past four years, politicians have fought over — and, in some cases, attempted to eliminate — funding for Johnstown's National Drug Intelligence Center.

That battle appears to be over, at least for the time being.

President Barack Obama's proposed budget for fiscal year 2010, which was released Thursday, allocates about \$44 million for the Washington Street center.

And in another sign of good news for the center's future, the document for the first time gives NDIC a specific niche in the Department of Justice's spending plan.

"This budget request will help establish the Department of Justice as NDIC's permanent funding source," Justice spokesman Dean Boyd said Thursday.

Since 2005, former President George W. Bush had made annual attempts to shutter the intelligence center. The proposed budgets issued by Bush's White House had allocated only enough cash to close NDIC and redistribute its relevant duties among other agencies.

But NDIC backers — including U.S. Rep. John Murtha, the Johnstown Democrat who brought the newly created center to this area in the early 1990s — lobbied successfully to allocate funding for the facility each year.

The funding fight was based partly on principle and partly on politics.

Critics argued that NDIC is wasteful and duplicates work done by other offices. But advocates said the center plays a critical role in coordinating the nation's battle against the trafficking and abuse of illegal drugs.

The dispute fell along party lines, and Murtha reiterated Thursday that he believes he was targeted because of his opposition to the war in Iraq.

"It's unfortunate that for the past few years the Bush administration used the NDIC as a political chip because I disagreed with their Iraq policy," the congressman said in a written statement.

Murtha had predicted that, with a new Democratic administration in the White House, the struggle would end. But he also attributes the budgetary shift to NDIC staff members, saying he is "proud of their accomplishments and the work that they are doing."

"Both Congress and the Obama administration recognize that the NDIC is invaluable to our drug intelligence and counter-drug operations," Murtha said.

"Their highly respected expertise and skills are particularly important today given the current situation along the Mexican border."

Congress still must approve Obama's budget.

The \$44 million currently allocated for NDIC, which has 239 employees, would be equal to the money Murtha helped secure for the center for fiscal 2009.

But it also is significant that the money is formally included in the Justice Department's budget request.

Throughout its history, NDIC has been administered by Justice officials but funded through an item inserted into the Department of Defense budget. The proposed change for fiscal 2010 would place NDIC funding and operations under one roof — possibly for years to come.

The rhetoric concerning NDIC has changed drastically. In 2006, a Justice Department spokesman said the the center's resources "should be realigned to support priority counter-terrorism and national-security initiatives."

On Thursday, Boyd said NDIC "provides coordinated and consolidated organizational drug intelligence to policy-makers from law-enforcement and national-security agencies."